

OUR MAGICAL WORLD

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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For Steve Weaver

Who gave me the tools and passion to accomplish my dreams.

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Introduction

Sesame Street, the landmark children's television show about a diverse neighborhood in New York, turns 40 this year. I have been alive for 28 of its 40 years, and it's affected me heavily through all 28. It taught me the alphabet, numbers, and much more subliminally, that differences between people were something to embrace. I firmly believe that I am a better person for growing up with *Sesame Street* as a teacher, and educational researchers have drawn much the same conclusion.

According to *Sesame Street* founder Joan Ganz Cooney (2001) the program's goal from its beginnings was "to educate using what the producers felt were the strongest points of the television medium, including high production values, sophisticated writing, and quality film and animation." When *Sesame Street* debuted in 1969 there were fewer choices for children's entertainment, in large part due to the very small number of television channels available compared to today. The other choices were largely meant to entertain children instead of educate. This is what originally set *Sesame Street* apart-

Now it is quite common for children's television shows to have an educational component, even if a majority of shows still keep entertainment as their main mandate. What is missing in all of the educational shows appearing on American television today is a show that aims to teach American children about the world outside of the United States.

My creative project is a pilot of a children's television show to address what I feel is an area of need on American television, the aforementioned show educating children about the world outside of the United States. The show focuses on teaching Kindergarten through 2nd grade students world history, geography, and cultural diversity. It is my

intention to use the show to build respect for international communities and cultures found both abroad and within the borders of the United States. I build upon tried and true techniques from successful children's television shows of the past and present, such as mixing human actors with puppets, dividing the show into segments, using animation, and utilizing other production methods deemed necessary to make the show successful.

This written document serves as an accompaniment to the television pilot. In this paper I share research to demonstrate that the goals of the project were justified and obtainable, as well as research done on previous children's educational television shows, which shaped the formation of the creative project. I then describe the method used in the physical creation of my creative project, discuss the results of the project, including the major understandings captured and reflected in the project, and give a final overview of major conclusions reached including limitations on this project and recommendations for future projects to continue the goals set forth by this project.

Part 1: Literature Review

As I initially set out to find literature on my subject, I had a very broad range of topics to explore. The further I went into my searches the more two words consistently appeared: *prosocial media*. *Prosocial media* is a term that was unfamiliar to me at the start of my project, but it is now one that I align myself with quite closely. The term originated as a counter to the vast amount of research conducted on the negative effects of media on children. Researchers, including *Sesame Street* creator Joan Ganz Cooney, sought to prove that media, if used properly, could have a positive impact on children. The term *prosocial media* developed out of this type of research.

Prosocial media are any means of communication that encourage selfless qualities in children. According to Eisenberg, Fabes, and Spinrad (2006) “prosocial behavior can broadly be defined as any voluntary behavior intended to benefit another person.”

Barbara J. Wilson (2008) adds “altruism is the most common example of prosocial behavior. Others are friendliness, sharing, cooperation, sympathy, and even acceptance of others from different groups”. My creative project is designed to influence children to accept others from different cultures and, in doing so, is an example of prosocial media by Wilson’s definition.

With the knowledge of what prosocial media are I set out to find their effects. It was important to make sure that a show like mine could be effective, or more accurately as effective as I want it to be. Mussen and Eisenberg-Berg (1977) reviewed several studies on this very topic and concluded, “the overwhelming weight of the evidence supports the hypothesis that exposure to television programs that model prosocial behavior enhances children’s prosocial tendencies”. To further illustrate this point I examined a study by Friedrich et al (1975). In the study half of the children in a preschool classroom were exposed to *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* while the other half were exposed to non-prosocial television programs. After three days of exposure to the programs the children were given the opportunity to either work on their own art project, or assist another student who was in need of help on an art project. More of the children that were shown *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* chose to help a fellow classmate than children who were shown non-prosocial programming.

My creative project is intended for children in Kindergarten through 2nd grade, or roughly 5 – 7 years old. Research shows that prosocial messages are most effective to

children in this age range. Mares and Woodard (2005) concluded, “the effect of prosocial content varied by children’s age and socioeconomic status, but not by gender. Effects increased sharply between the ages of three and seven and then declined until age sixteen”. Attracting children in this target age range will hopefully ensure that the positive prosocial messages of the show will leave a lasting impression.

In addition to *prosocial media*, another term that consistently appeared during my initial research was *xenophobia*. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary (2009) defines xenophobia as “fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign”. This is exactly the type of fear my creative project hopes to eliminate. The negative consequences of children affected by xenophobic behaviors are well documented. An essay by Bryan and Vavrus (2005) linked the xenophobic governments controlling the educational systems in Nazi Germany and Rwanda, and the absence of anti-xenophobic forces countering the educational system, to the creation of heavy ethnic tensions among children in those countries. This serves as an extreme example of what can happen in such a strong xenophobic environment ~~and~~ with ~~such~~ a lack of prosocial influences. To a lesser degree xenophobic tendencies are not foreign to the United States. As shown in a study by Tsai (2006) xenophobic actions by U.S. citizens towards children of immigrants “marginalized and threaten[ed] their psychosocial development”. My goal is to convey that prosocial behaviors can transcend cultural differences.

Curriculum goals for the project are taken from the Indiana Department of Education’s website (Indiana Department of Education, 2009). The site serves many purposes, one of which is to provide users with educational standards and lesson plans for all grades and subjects. I used the site to learn what educational standards were

reasonable to expect of students in kindergarten, first, and second grade. I discovered that during kindergarten, students learn that maps and globes are different representations of the Earth's surface and begin to explore the physical and human geographic characteristics of their school, neighborhood and community. First graders will identify the basic elements of maps and globes and explain basic facts concerning the relationship of the sun to daily and seasonal weather, and they will identify selected geographic characteristics of their home, school and neighborhood. Finally, second graders will locate their community, state and nation on maps and globes, identify major geographic characteristics of their local community, and explore geographic relationships between the physical and environmental characteristics of their community. These educational standards guided me in the writing of the script for the project.

I've drawn much inspiration and also warning from Sesame Workshop's international coproduction of *Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim*. The program was created as an attempt to ease tensions between Israeli and Palestinian youth. The production partners Sesame Workshop with an Israeli producer, Israel Educational Television, and a Palestinian producer, Al-Quds University's Institute for Modern Media in Ramallah. The preproduction, production, and postproduction steps taken by the three producers were well documented by Cole, Labin, and del Rocio Galaraza (2008). The show is a landmark example of using prosocial media to effectively change perceptions of one group of people towards another. While the show is considered a success, the rate of Israeli youth who were positively affected was disproportional to that of Palestinian youth.

While there was a significant increase in positive perceptions of "other" from both Arab and Jewish children living in Israel, this was not true for the Palestinian children

living in West Bank/Gaza. One possible explanation for the results concerns the differences in the interventions the children received. Key elements of the two productions were different. These included the amount of material featuring the “other” culture, the length of the episodes (which in Israel were 30 minutes and in the West Bank/Gaza only 15 minutes) and the number of episodes produced (over 60 on the IETV version and only 20 in the Al-Quds version). Thus, viewers of the two series experienced great variation in the degree of reinforcement of the projects’ cross-cultural educational messages. Consequently, the Israeli children (who viewed the Israeli broadcast of the series) were exposed to more Palestinian created material than was analogously true of Palestinian children viewing in Gaza and the West Bank, where viewers saw primarily Palestinian material with only a minimal amount of Israeli content

Although I will not be dividing my show in two to reach two different cultures like *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim*, the research did impact the amount of time I decided to focus on the country of Mexico in my creative project. I need to make sure that the time and material I devote to Mexico can be easily granted to other countries in future episodes so as to avoid any of the disparities evident in *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim*.

Part 2: Methods

The approach of this creative project is founded in classic production techniques commonly found in children’s television, starting with the characters and then moving to the physical production. From the project’s inception it has always been planned to contain a mix of human actors and puppets. This approach has proven successful in many of the highest rated children’s television shows of all time, including *Sesame Street* and

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, and as a puppeteer by trade, I am confident in my ability to bring convincing characters to life.

The main characters of the show share a relationship common among humans and puppets on various preexisting shows. The main human character of the piece is Pierre Magique, a French magician who, through his weekly travels, becomes the show's main protagonist in introducing other cultures. Pierre takes on the role of teacher in the show. He is not omniscient, but is very knowledgeable about the world, and knows where to find information he lacks. Pierre's French heritage helps promote a healthy attitude towards cultural diversity by providing a constant role model to the audience who is not American.

The role of Pierre is based on a character created in 2003 by Nathaniel Mikulich, the actor portraying Pierre in this creative project. The character was created during a time when anti-French sentiment in the U.S. was quite high, as marked by the U.S. House of Representatives replacement of the word "French" with "Freedom" on all menus in the three House office building's cafeterias. French toast became "freedom toast." French fries became "freedom fries," and so on. According to a Pew Global Attitudes survey (2006) only 52% of Americans have a favorable impression of France, as compared to 79% in February of 2002. With new French and American presidents elected since the Pew study, it is difficult to say whether opinions of the French by Americans have improved, declined, or stayed consistent, but regardless I still believe the character of Pierre is an important character to have on television, and can be quite effective in showing American children the positive aspects of French culture.

Pierre's main puppet friend is his rabbit, Lapin (the French word for rabbit).

Lapin starts out as a real rabbit and is transformed into a puppet by Pierre. Lapin acts as the voice of the children in the audience. He asks the questions they would ask and has trouble understanding the concepts they would have trouble understanding.

Great care was exercised in modeling the antagonists of the show, Bonnie and Clyde. When writing their dialog I was careful to make their bad behaviors come out of ignorance instead of the desire to do wrong. This serves the purpose of being more easily forgiven and correctable. I was very fearful that if the antagonists appeared to be of any particular race that they could show their race in a negative light, thus negating the key concept of the show. To avoid this potential misfortune, the antagonists were designed to be puppets with purple flesh – a color that is not found on humans. Unfortunately the purple puppets that were built for the show had a design flaw that made their skin noticeably crack and peel while being operated. On the first day of shooting I made the decision to replace them with backup puppets from my personal collection. The backup puppets are covered in orange felt and appear a bit Caucasian on screen, thus negating my original concept of keeping these characters free of any race. This is certainly an issue that would need to be corrected if future episodes of *Our Magical World* are created.

An animated segment was written to introduce children to Mexican geography and culture. The segment introduces the audience to Bret Explorer, a bumbling world explorer, and his pet parrot Fire Squawks. The characters are loud and colorful and serve the purpose of making a heavily educational portion of the show entertaining. The segment breaks up the show by giving the children new characters in a new situation as their attention spans start to wane after concentrating on Pierre and Lapin.

This project is shot in high definition using the 16:9 aspect ratio. There is no doubt that this is the way television is moving, and I want to ensure that my project has the best possible chance of staying relevant for as long as possible.

For this project I was pleased to be able to utilize Ball State University's new virtual reality set. The set fit my needs in various ways. First as a student it would have proved difficult to find on-campus studio space that would have allowed me enough time to build a physical set and keep it up for the duration of the project. The virtual set is loaded onto a computer and only requires hard drive space. Secondly the virtual set allows pieces of the set to be animated, which fits in quite nicely with the feel of the show. As the main character is a magician, part of the essence of the show involves him doing various magical activities. Some of these activities are easily pulled off no matter what environment we are in, such as card tricks, scarf tricks, and other tricks traditionally used by magicians. However the virtual set lets us go beyond magic that could be done in the real world and allows us to make Pierre an even more amazing magician. The virtual set allows Pierre to make a globe appear out of and vanish into thin air, as well as open doors and rotate fireplaces with a snap of his fingers.

Part 3: Results, Discussion and Final Overview

As seen in the first three sections of this paper, prosocial media, like this project, can have a significant impact on shaping the positive behaviors of children in their formative years. It is important to keep in mind while viewing this project that it is intended as a pilot, and therefore only serves as a seed for which the grand ideas of building respect for diversity in a new generation can grow. This project uses prosocial, anti-xenophobic messages wrapped in many standard children's television practices to

start the process of leading the youth of the United States towards a more peaceful, tolerant future.

The project turned out largely as I had envisioned it, but there are certainly limitations, which kept me from fully realizing my vision. One example is the lack of diversity on screen. Our human actor is Caucasian, and because of our need to use orange skinned puppets for Bonnie and Clyde the project seems to be overpopulated by the Caucasian race. An effort was made to cast a variety of children from different ethnic backgrounds for their part in the “Bonjour Song,” but diversity is only modeled for two of the nearly twenty-seven minutes. Great care will need to be exercised in any future episodes to make sure diversity is shown and celebrated on screen, otherwise the core concept of the show will be lost.

In traditional television productions involving puppets it is common to have small monitors available near the puppeteers so that they can see their performances in real time and make necessary adjustments. The studio I produced the project in was not equipped to provide the puppeteers with such monitors, only two large monitors placed near the studio cameras. Since the puppeteers needed to conceal themselves behind objects it was often not possible to watch the two large monitors, making it impossible for the puppeteers to judge and correct flaws in their performances. This resulted in a number of scenes where the puppets’ arms appear to be in an unnatural position, their focus is off, or other performance flaws are evident leading to a less than realistic performance. Investing in small monitors to position in easy eyesight of the puppeteers would solve this problem in future episodes.

As this project is meant to be a television pilot there is a great deal of plot exposition which is necessary to be expressed in order to answer questions the audience will undeniably have while meeting new characters. This exposition was needed, but creates a project that has an uneven emphasis on dialog over visuals, especially for a 5 – 7 year old. Dr. Barton D. Schmitt (2005), Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, writes that “a normal attention span is 3 to 5 minutes per year of a child's age,” but goes on to warn that it is “much less when watching television.” That means a normal child of 5, the youngest age of this project’s target audience, should be able to hold attention span on one topic for at least 15 minutes on a non-televised activity, and less on a television show. I added graphics, animations, and two segments with characters outside of the main cast to break up the dialog heavy parts of the project, but I still feel that more could have been done during the writing process to make the project easier to follow for the attention span of a 5 – 7 year old. If future episodes are made an emphasis will have to be placed on keeping the pace of the script quick to hold the audience’s attention.

The virtual reality set provided its share of headaches during production. The set operates by tracking a grid that exists on the main wall in the studio. In order to display the set properly four squares of the grid must be visible to the camera at any time. This turned out to be a major limitation as it made getting close up shots of our characters extremely difficult. Because of this the project has many more wide and medium shots than I had originally planned. Since close ups tend to give the audience a sense of connection with a character, the deficiency of close ups may result in the audience encountering a harder time relating to the characters than I had hoped for. Since the

production of this project the virtual reality set has undergone changes which allow the cameras to much more easily capture close ups without disturbing the virtual set. If future episodes are made it would be wise to take advantage of the set's updated technology by utilizing more close ups.

Despite the aforementioned limitations many of the project's goals were accomplished. This project captures an excitement for learning about new cultures and displays it in a way that the target audience should find entertaining and enriching. I am particularly proud of the animated segment where Bret Explorer and Fire Squawks take a trip to Mexico to discover what makes the country unique. The segment packs many educational benchmarks from the Indiana Department of Education into a relatively short piece, yet the piece takes on the feel of a highly entertaining segment rather than one that is strictly for educational purposes.

Finally, I feel this project did a good job of capturing an excitement for learning about new cultures. Pierre's words of advice to Lapin about the importance of making an effort to learn words and phrases in Spanish before travelling to Mexico models for the audience the importance of showing respect to others. This respect is a prosocial trait that is a core concept at the heart of this project.

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